

April 2, 2003

Dear Members of Congress:

As leading academic experts in the fields of special education, child psychology and education policy, we offer this letter of enthusiastic support for “The Realizing the Spirit of IDEA Act” introduced by Representative Pete Stark. It will better educate and ultimately improve the lives of disabled children throughout the United States.

Congress enacted “The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act” (IDEA) over 25 years ago. The original intent of IDEA was to ensure that disabled children had access to the same quality public education as all other children. While IDEA has successfully opened the doors of public schools to children with disabilities, their rates of graduation, attendance, academic achievement and drop out lag well behind all other segments of the school population. After they leave school, young people with disabilities are twice as likely to be unemployed and typically do not receive a post secondary education.

We believe “The Realizing the Spirit of IDEA Act” will provide the right incentives to make the spirit of the original IDEA legislation a reality. “The Realizing the Spirit of IDEA Act” will dramatically increase the financial support for children with disabilities, and if a school continues to improve, will provide full federal funding. However, in order to receive increases, school districts must make sure disabled children are not left behind by closing the achievement gap between disabled students and their non-disabled classmates. In return for mandatory increases in funding for IDEA, school districts must help disabled students increase their attendance, academic proficiency and graduation rate, lower the incidence of drop out, and improve rates of post-secondary employment and education.

Since IDEA was enacted, social science research has provided solutions that can improve the educational and career outcomes of children with disabilities. However, the current system primarily provides incentives for schools to focus on following the letter of the law rather than implementing education policies to improve students’ performance. By holding schools accountable for improving the education of students with disabilities, this bill will encourage schools to implement empirically based interventions that research has demonstrated work.

“The Realizing The Spirit of IDEA Act” will improve IDEA; moreover, it provides schools the flexibility, incentives and supports necessary to have IDEA fulfill it’s original intent. That is why we encourage others to join with us and to help enact this important legislation.

Sincerely,

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